

JAPANESE MASCOTS: DIPLOMATIC TOOL, DOMESTIC ESCAPISM

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ABSTRACT

In Japan, mascots are not only representatives of sports teams and sugary cereals, but are vital diplomatic tools of communication and domestic tools of escapism. Though a multitude of mascots exist, scholarship on the topic tends to portray the body of mascots as one-dimensional. This thesis analyzes the modern mascot field and provides previously undefined categories for mascots based on their application, as their absence hinders further analysis. These definitions also describe the subversive social space that mascots inhabit in Japanese society and allow the thesis to examine consumers' relationships with mascots. An analysis of the U.S. and Israeli embassy mascots reveals that, through these Japanese-styled mouthpieces, foreign countries can more gently promote their goals to the Japanese public. A historical contextualization of mascots elucidates their cultural heft and provides a framework to examine the mascots of the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Japan as soft diplomacy actors. Embassy mascots are unique in their form and application, presenting a Japanese-styled mouthpiece whose goal is to alleviate the country-specific anxieties that Japanese people experience – a truly usable manner of soft power given their agency. While embassy mascot's efficacy, longevity, and matters of who controls the soft power they embody are debatable, further scholarship should examine them seriously as possibly affecting diplomatic relations with Japan and not dismiss them as simply another fad.

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Introduction

One may be surprised to learn that, in Japan, pop culture has not relegated mascots to representing sports teams and marketing high sugar content cereals, though they do work in these familiar fields. Japanese mascots in fact run in the same circles as pharmaceutical company executives and prefectural governors. Tourist attractions and phone company campaigns are not complete without their representative mascot, a cute and often silly costumed character punnily named or designed in reference to some aspect of their employing organization. It is nigh impossible to traverse a well-visited and densely populated city like Tokyo without running into one of these creatures, waving to attract children while a partnered (human) co-worker hands their parents a flyer or tissue packet. With mascot events occurring almost weekly, the chances of running into a crowd of the fluffy, clumsy creatures while on a Sunday afternoon stroll are consistently high, especially if one lives in a metropolis.

While it has become difficult to imagine the Japanese marketing world without these characters, they were not always so commonplace. Mascots as a trend began in the mid-1970s with the creation of Hello Kitty, whose stunning commercial success attracted the attention of private sector marketing teams and led to the creation of company mascots around the mid-1990s.¹ These characters attempted to capture the same charm that Kitty exuded, using this enticing nature not just to sell character-branded goods like their predecessors, but to raise awareness of and gently direct consumers toward their parent company's goods or services. Mascots then made the shift to the public sector in the mid-2000s, with prefectural and city governments jumping on the character

¹ Anne Allison, "Portable Monsters and Commodity Cuteness: Pokémon as Japan's New Global Power," *Postcolonial Studies* vol. 6, no. 3 (2003): 386.

bandwagon with hometown mascots.² After this last switch, mascots enjoyed a period of high growth and popularity, from around 2008 until 2014, when the Japanese Ministry of Finance ordered prefectures to reduce their inflated mascot population, citing a waste of taxpayer dollars on what they considered a marketing gimmick.³

While domestic and international reporters alike were focusing on this order and announcing the death of these adorable creatures, they missed the mascot world growing a new, albeit smaller branch on its family tree. In 2013, the Israeli embassy in Japan was the first to introduce an embassy mascot, who began work both in real life as a costumed character and in an animated web series as a ‘peace ambassador,’ promoting tourism to Israel and a kinder image of the country to Japanese citizens.⁴ Soon after, in 2014, the American embassy followed suit with its own mascot, complete with a costumed actor, an online FAQ page, a web-diary written by him about his activities, and a web series that promoted and guided applicants through the process of preparing to study abroad. This newest iteration of the mascot trend raises serious questions about the role of these characters, and soft power in general, in the realm of international relations today. Is this a new, long-term line of communication for foreign nations with Japanese citizens? Or is this trend a flash in the pan of foreign service engagement strategy?

Regardless of this new mascot form’s staying power or status as a pop culture phenomenon, the goals these embassies are taking on with their mascots are active

² Chris Carlier, “The Strange, Enduring Charm of Japan’s Civic Mascots,” CityLab, June 5, 2018, <https://www.citylab.com/design/2018/06/the-strange-enduring-charm-of-japans-civic-mascots/561488/>

³ Vicky Gan, “The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Municipal Mascot,” CityLab, April 9, 2015, <https://www.citylab.com/design/2015/04/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-japanese-municipal-mascot/390093/>.

⁴ “Shalo-um-chan” - Our Embassy’s Official Yuru Chara,” Embassy of Israel in Japan, June 14, 2013, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://embassies.gov.il/tokyo-en/NewsAndEvents/Pages/Yuru-Chara-final-results-.aspx>

diplomatic moves and should be studied as such. This study takes an innovative approach in examining the Japanese mascot form and its application to the realm of international relations by regarding it as a potentially critical method of nation branding and public diplomacy for foreign governments in Japan. As William Tsutsui argues throughout his analysis of Japanese popular culture and its historical roots, there is no such thing as “just” a representation; how entities, be it a company or a culture, choose to represent themselves is significant and reveals some truths about the psychology of that entity.⁵ The popular culture of Japan and how foreign governments are interacting with that culture is the key to understanding the realities of both countries and their aims in the realm of international relations.

Through a combination of sources focusing on Japanese popular culture and its historical forebears, modern mascot history, and the role of soft power in international relations, this thesis will seek to answer the pressing questions surrounding mascot use. As no cultural trends “happen overnight,” Tsutsui and Debra J. Occhi’s scholarship on how Japanese popular culture’s historical roots currently influence its modern iterations help to establish the use of mascots as a lasting and culturally significant form of communication in Japan.⁶ While Tsutsui’s focus is on pop culture as a whole, Occhi’s scholarship directly connects early Japanese popular art to Japanese religious beliefs and modern mascot use, thus providing both a broader cultural frame and a more focused look at art and religion’s influence on the history of the Japanese mascot form. Christine Yano’s extensive work on the history and international influence of Hello Kitty and

⁵ William M. Tsutsui, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization*, vol. 6, Key Issues in Asian Studies (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies Inc., 2010).

⁶ Ibid., 5; Debra J. Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese *Kyara* with their Anthropomorphic Forebears,” *Asian Ethnology* vol. 71, no. 1 (2012).

kawaii (cute) culture elucidates both the origins of commonplace mascot characteristics and the important shift that occurred in mascots' purpose in the 1970s: from focusing solely on mascots as a domestic method of communication to an internationally consumable good.⁷ Finally, Anne Allison's scholarship on Pokémon – a form of Japanese mascots – and how consumers relate to them will reveal the social impact and emotional power mascots have as a form, when done correctly.⁸

In the realm of international relations, Joseph Nye Jr.'s seminal text on soft power and its applications to world politics, tempered with Jing Sun's critique of the concept, provides a theoretical basis of what soft power actually is and how it utilizes mascots. The definition Nye proposes for soft power has received criticism for its wide definition of what constitutes as soft power. Employing Sun's argument against the idea that success of a country's domestic commercial goods automatically reflects an increase in a country's soft power and political leverage provides a nuanced approach to the function of soft power and how mascots fit into its implementation. In fact, mascots are the most usable form of soft power a nation can have, as they are its 'living' actors, able to speak, listen, and respond in their everyday work.

The first chapter of this thesis analyzes the characteristics of the different mascot families and offers definitions of the different types of mascots. Until now, scholarship on Japanese mascots has not attempted to disaggregate these types, but has instead more broadly described mascot forms. Thus, this thesis' definitions of the two main types of mascots will be the first of their kind. The second chapter analyzes the web series and other promotional materials featuring the embassy mascots of the Israeli and American

⁷ Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁸ Allison, "Portable Monsters."

embassies in Japan, and draws conclusions about the diplomatic roles of these two mascots by considering their reasons for implementation. Chapter three examines the arc of mascot history, identifying the cultural origins of modern mascots, as well as the economic and cultural events that shaped the form. Without this context, it is impossible to appreciate the weight and influence of the mascot trend. Finally, employing definitions, history, and implementation of the mascot trend, the final chapter will analyze the role of mascots and soft power in international relations, what the creation of embassy mascots means for the future of international relations with Japan, and consider the future of the mascot trend in Japan.

I. What Makes a Mascot?

The use of Japanese mascots is a trend well-documented by academia, daily news reporting, and social media, covering everything from the most internationally famous mascots to the most obscure small-town ones. However, the analysis of and theorizing about the popularity of mascot use often portrays the world of mascots as one-dimensional. Though the scholarship delves into the complexities of mascot marketing strategy, cultural influence, and human psychology, it has ignored the complexities inherent within the mascot world, instead treating each type as functionally identical iterations of a unified body of characters. Such an undifferentiation is not previous researchers' fault nor intent; the body of scholarship has only in recent years reached a critical mass that reveals the differences between mascot types. However, this absence hinders more nuanced analysis, so this thesis proposes original definitions of the different branches of the mascot family tree that capture the complexity of the mascot trend to advance the scholarly conversation and facilitate this analysis.

The nonexistence of clear mascot type definitions is not the only shortcoming in the field. Researchers have also overlooked the societal role of mascots, or, rather, their subversive bucking of any such role. Japanese society, with its multi-level system of polite speech and variety of social rituals, is historically defined by a hierarchical social structure. While researchers have examined the social effects of mascots on their audiences, what societal role mascots fulfill has not been analyzed. Some scholars, Occhi and Yano, have examined how and why Japanese people consume and participate in mascot culture, something they consider a brief escape from the high expectations of the hierarchical structure. However, this scholarship has been solely focused on the

consumer's perspective and their reasons for participating in mascot culture, with a dearth of scholarship examining the relationship from the mascot's perspective. No existing scholarship has attempted to explain what a *mascot's* societal role or purpose is. A new definition of mascot types allows one to explain how they skillfully create an extra-societal space vital to their success.

Self-Oriented Mascots

The first category that most consumers, both inside and outside of Japan, have likely encountered is the *self-oriented* mascot. These mascots are defined by their flexible application: either as an independent product, or as a hireable spokesperson for a partner company's good or service that can become the good itself. Self-oriented mascots achieve this flexibility due to their simple designs, backstories, and personalities; enough of their own character exists to be a marketable product alone, but little enough exists that does not impede their marketing of or transformation into another good or service. This balance between substance and simplicity is the key to their two-pronged success. Too much of their own personality or too complex of a design, and they will make a poor transmutable spokesperson, while most likely succeeding as an independent character. Too little development makes for a bland mascot that will fail as an independent product and brand, but may perform better as a spokesperson. However, they will not bring much new attention to the brand they have been hired to market; a well-designed self-oriented mascot is hired to lend its star power to other brands and generate new attention.

A self-oriented mascot's purpose is to *sell* itself or another good, so being able to shift its form from its usual appearance to a toothbrush into the appearance of an airplane is a

requirement for its success as both spokesperson and product. As Japanese mascot-branded goods feature the mascot in their own form about as often as they transmute the character into the form of the marketed good, self-oriented mascots must be abstractable, able to take the form of anything a consumer could think of purchasing. However, even as a briefcase, cutlery set, or notebook, a mascot must remain itself, or it risks losing the power it brings to marketing the product. As self-oriented mascots' success comes from being consumed and building up an audience that follows and adores them, if they are unrecognizable after transforming into the product they have been hired to market, they lose their power as a marketing tool. Furthermore, in order to maximize a mascot's power (and thus revenue), mascot parent companies and/or designers work to create a world of products featuring a mascot. This goal is possible because of their mutability, which is derived from the simplicity of the original design. The marketing of Pokémon, a series of games, TV programs, and movies featuring a world inhabited by an ever-expanding number of self-oriented mascots best demonstrates this mutability. Anne Allison describes how Pokémon are plastered on the "endless surfaces of daily existence," on everything from clothing to bubble bath containers, to the delight of both corporate bank accounts and fan consumers wishing to fully envelop themselves in their chosen worlds.⁹ With clean, often minimalist designs that are memorable and thus recognizable, self-oriented mascots take on an iconic nature, but maintain a warmth no logo could hope to achieve.

Parent companies create simple back stories for mascots and give them unique but still simple personalities in order to create a structure in which the mascot can logically exist, while leaving space for the audience to 'play' and exist alongside the mascot.

⁹ Allison, "Portable Monsters," 392.

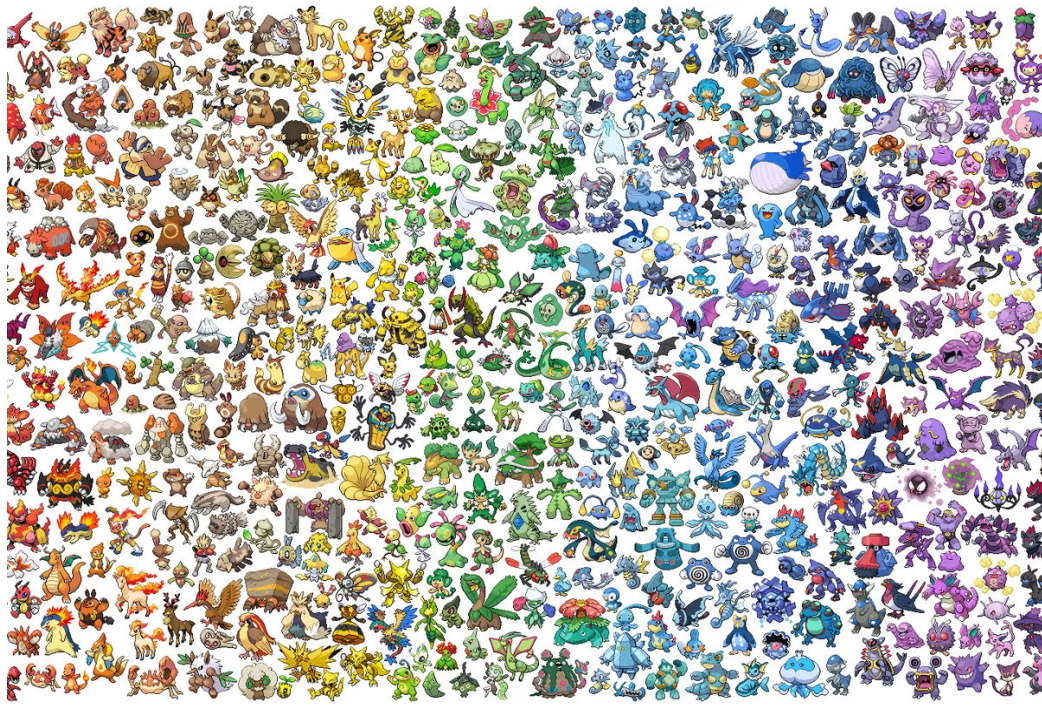


Fig. 1 - A (now-incomplete) collection of Pokémon. There are currently 809 “pocket monsters” in the franchise.

Pokémon as a franchise has built the distribution of character into the game structure itself, codifying it through assigning a Pokémon one or two types (from a list of eighteen) that generally follow elemental conventions and one of five natures (such as ‘hardy’ or ‘bashful’). These characteristics determine the effectiveness of one Pokémon’s attacks against another in battle, as well as their statistical development as they level up, respectively. Furthermore, each pocket monster has a short blurb of backstory in the Pokémon Index (or Pokédex). Such a delineated and complex system is unique to the Pokémon franchise, but exemplifies the purpose of keeping mascot background information simple. A Pokémon’s type, vaguely defined nature, and one to two sentences of description provide enough of a foundation for a consumer to build a world of imagined interaction with their favored Pokémon without hemming in or requiring a certain level of consumer participation.

Such world- and character-building defines self-oriented mascots' iconic nature. Creating a world in which the mascot can play and meet friends, including the consumer, expands merchandising opportunities for the company. As previously mentioned, developers maintain the simplicity of these mascots' personalities, striking one characteristic note usually reinforced by their art style. They draw permanently cheerful and upbeat characters with an array of bright colors, or depict a lazy yet humorous do-nothing character with simpler shapes and lines (see figures 3 and 7, respectively). The simple level of detail allows for varying levels of involvement on the part of the consumer. One can enjoy a mascot for their cute behavior and appearance alone, while others delight in knowing a mascot's hometown, favorite food, or type description in the case of Pokémon. The combination of a transposable appearance and easily digestible level of personification creates a novelty spokesperson for partner companies, one that can be, within reason, altered by the company to suit their needs. Self-oriented mascots, with their consistent cores but flexible forms, can *become* the very thing they have been hired to market. From promoting high-speed train travel to a limited-time McDonald's dessert, hopeful partner companies recognize the cultural power held by the self-oriented mascot, and seek to borrow some of it to elevate their own brand.

So far, I have outlined the broad characteristics of self-oriented mascots to provide the reader with a clear definition of the group. With these characteristics in mind, we can now examine specific examples of self-oriented mascots to illustrate their usefulness as a marketing strategy. Most mascots that fall into the self-oriented category originate from what is probably the most famous mascot-producing company: Sanrio. A Japanese dry-goods purveyor, Sanrio has created a whole world of mascots, one of which

is considered mascot royalty. Hello Kitty serves as a trailblazer, a matriarch, a guide to this family that is seemingly hell-bent on involving themselves in every aspect of people's lives. With her simple back story and blank, yet somehow sweet, expression, Hello Kitty was 'born' in the early 1970s with an easy marketability to children and adults alike. Arguably the original event that began the popular consumption of mascots, Kitty's creation and ascent to international stardom has led to much scholarship about her, most prominently led by Yano. Her detailed history and analysis of Kitty inspired this thesis and its examination of self-oriented mascots. Articles often pinpoint Kitty as both the beginning of the mascot trend as well as its most popular star domestically and internationally, so an examination of Kitty will exemplify the norms of this family of mascots.¹⁰

A now-common characteristic of the self-oriented mascot family originated with Kitty-san, namely the modern iteration of *kawaii* she embodies. *Kawaii* is a complex Japanese concept that is usually oversimplified in translation as merely 'cute.' In Japanese, however, *kawaii* implies vulnerability and dependency, and is often used by viewers to proclaim that such traits endear the object to the viewer.¹¹ Though intentionally given a "flat and abstract" design, Hello Kitty's oft-described blankness is not unsettling as some might think; it is inherently *kawaii*.¹² Yano explains how Kitty's simple, childlike image was popularized by the simultaneous rise of *kawaii* and *shōjo*, young girl, culture, which cemented this style of mascot as both universally appealing and profitable.¹³ By capitalizing on this shift towards the acceptance of and desire for *kawaii/shōjo* culture, as

¹⁰ Allison, "Portable Monsters," 386.

¹¹ Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 56; Allison 'Portable Monsters,' 387.

¹² *Ibid.*, 58-59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 47.

well as the subsequent increase in goods (see fig. 2) marketed to enable the performance of that culture, Hello Kitty came to symbolize the cultural phenomenon itself. She set the bar for all mascots who would follow her.¹⁴



Fig. 2 - A sample of possible Hello Kitty-branded goods available for purchase

Kitty's once original, massively successful flatness is most obvious in her design, which was so simple that, according to Yano, just by broadening her positioning and outfit options, Sanrio could appeal to a wider age range.¹⁵ However, this simplicity is consistent, and reinforced by her background and personality. Though the layman would find this fact contrary to her fame and longevity, Kitty's page on Sanrio's website gives barely a paragraph of detail about her. It names her birthplace ("the suburbs of London"), explains that she lives with her identical sister, Mimmy, and their parents, and states she enjoys baking cookies and making new friends.¹⁶ However, as previously established,

¹⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵ Ibid., 58.

such simplicity is vital to Kitty's success: she has an easy-to-remember back story and light but enjoyable nature that gives her a clear 'flavor,' but this flavor does not affect her mutability as an icon.

However, as no design is universal in its appeal, one form of *kawaii* can only attract so many consumers. Thus, since creating Hello Kitty, Sanrio has developed a diverse variety of *kawaii* styles to cover every possible corner of consumer interest. This is an extension of the 'world of mascot goods' goal. By plastering every imaginable type of *kawaii* mascot on every imaginable item or service, parent companies will eventually be able to sell at least one product from one mascot's line of products to every consumer. While some may wonder whether creating so many kinds of *kawaii* would oversaturate the market or even muddy the artistic waters of the form, this diversification reinforces each mascot's appeal, as well the appeal of the overall trend. The creation of opposing forms of *kawaii* emphasizes the integrity of each individual character, the same way light and dark are defined by the absence of the other. On a commercial note, parent companies are able to offer consumers who find the world and style of Cinnamoroll (fig.2) or Little Twin Stars (fig.3) overwhelmingly ornate and fluffy something more their pace, like the simple lines and laid-back style of Keroppi (fig.4) or food-oriented Pompompurin (fig.5). The freedom to consume the goods one wishes, to the degree one wishes, serves the purposes of mascots' parent companies and fulfills the multitudinous desires of the consumer.

¹⁶ Sanrio, "Shop Hello Kitty Products - Sanrio," The Official Home of Hello Kitty & Friends, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://www.sanrio.com/categories/hello-kitty>.



Fig. 3 – Cell phone wallpaper of Cinnamoroll Stars'



Fig. 4 - Promotional art for Little Twin Stars' 40th Anniversary

Audiences can do as little as own a phone strap with their favorite mascot's face and style imprinted on it, or completely fill their lives with *kyarakutā* (character) emblazoned *guzzu* (goods).



Fig. 5 - Keroppi in a dapper bowtie

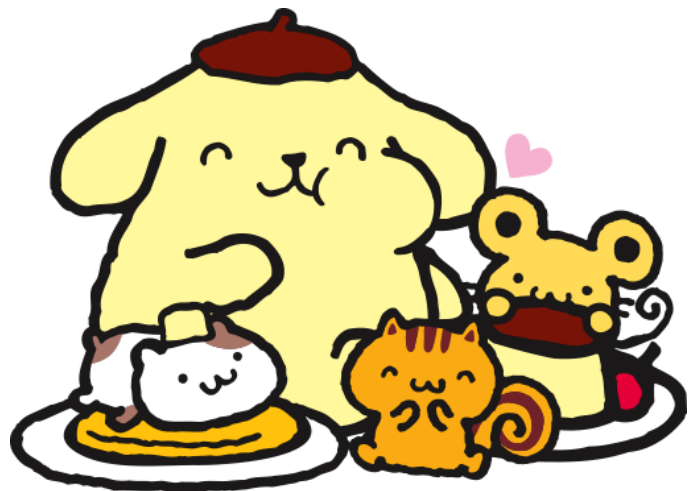


Fig. 6 - Pompompurin enjoying snacks with friends

Each new Sanrio family member exemplifies the constant attempt to adapt to new cultural trends and the effort to meet them with a complimentary *kawaii* mascot.

Gudetama, the lazy egg yolk, has become popular online due to his inherent lack of desire to do anything but lie in his ‘bed,’ an egg white, under his ‘blanket,’ a strip of bacon (see fig. 7 below). Young Japanese people today, as will be discussed in Chapter

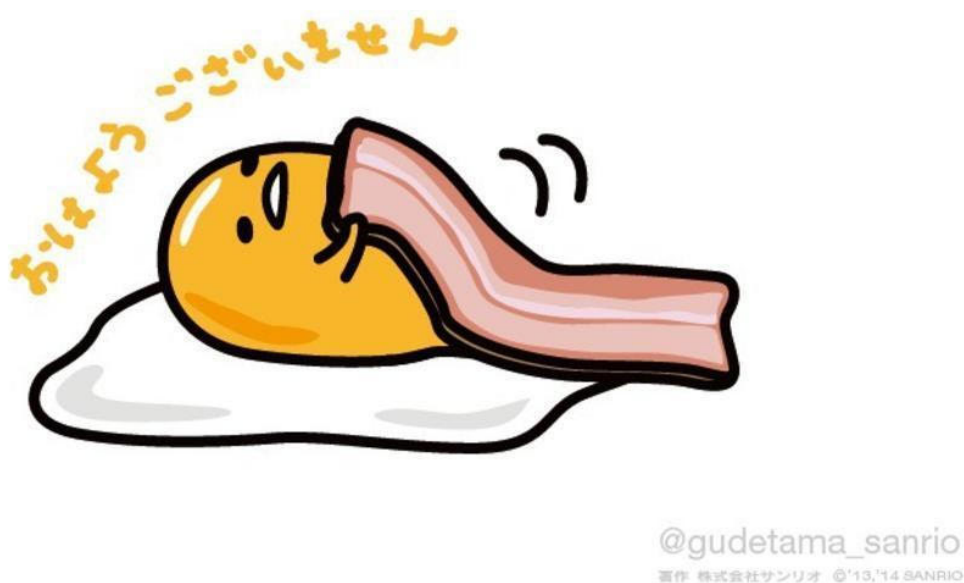


Fig. 7 - Gudetama proclaiming “Good Morning... *not*” while crawling back in ‘bed’

IV, experience high levels of stress and anxiety due to a unique intersection of both demanding academic or working worlds and a strict social structure. The fantasy of being like Gudetama, able to roll over and shake off the world with a simple sigh, seems purposefully targeted at younger generations of Japanese. This reported stress is ever-present, Anne Allison notes in her article “Portable Monsters and Commodity Cuteness,” where academic and professional rigor follows the young and old through every space in their world.¹⁷ Many who become deeply engaged with mascots seek to “[dislodge] the

¹⁷ Allison, “Portable Monsters,” 386.

heaviness and constraints of (productive) life,” to escape the pressures placed on them by society at least for a moment, to take a breath.¹⁸

However, this temporary escapism, or ‘healing’ nature of mascots can be taken to an unfortunate extreme. Allison further investigates this trend in a 2009 article “The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth,” explaining how the erosion of the traditional Japanese labor force, which focused on lifetime employment in a single company, and the post-1980s/90s economic bubble shift towards the production of “immaterial” goods like information encouraged young people’s escapism to unhealthy lengths.¹⁹ This shift, she claims, caused the “atomization” of the Japanese population, where young people have become isolated from society as they fail to live up to now-outdated expectations surrounding lifetime employment and early marriage.²⁰ Decried as unproductive (both economically and child-wise) and wasteful parasites, young people escape into the same products many economists hail as the saving grace of Japan: products that act as relationship replacements, like Pokémon.²¹ While these products allow stressed but otherwise ‘productive’ individuals to briefly escape into safe and easy worlds populated by ‘healing’ mascots, the same products can create a vicious, recursive cycle of isolation for those left behind by society. The self-serving, self-oriented worlds young people use to ease their uncontrollable loneliness only draws them further in and further away from the society and relationships that have essentially abandoned them.

As the popularity and mass consumption of self-oriented mascots speaks to a larger Japanese experience, such a trend could not go untouched by private and public

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Anne Allison, “The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2-3 (2009): 91.

²⁰ Allison, “The Cool Brand,” 96.

²¹ Ibid., 90.

enterprises in Japan, seeking to borrow a piece of the power Hello Kitty and her ilk wield for their own marketing purposes.

Service-Oriented Mascots

The other branch of the mascot family is less known internationally, due to the fact that they are less flexible than their iconic cousins as they do not only promote a brand, but rather *are* a brand. The *service-oriented* mascot promotes a specific company, locality, or government initiative. Debra Occhi's article on the historical origins of Japanese *kyara*, or characters, explains the service-oriented mascot as one "created to inspire belief and spur action" at the civic and commercial level. This goal is achieved through a careful combination of deep knowledge and approachable adorableness.²² Though they are just as *kawaii* as self-oriented mascots, service-oriented mascots do not make their living selling their own image. Instead, as an extension of their parent organization, they exist as a living embodiment of the brand, primarily through interacting with the real world in costume form.

Like sport team mascots in the U.S., these *kawaii* ambassadors lumber around in outfits that "[impede] the wearers' vision and movement" due to their typically large-headed designs.²³ This clumsiness, which plays on the inherent element of vulnerability, only adds to their *kawaii* nature.²⁴ Despite difficulties in moving quickly, these mascots have a better chance to connect intimately with their audience and share the deep knowledge they have about their brand. This knowledge distinguishes these mascots as experts, on par with a company's website or other promotional material. Yet, they are

²² Occhi, 109.

²³ Ibid., 122.

²⁴ Ibid.

able to communicate in real time with their audience, able to develop a relationship with them as opposed to existing primarily as static icons. Service-oriented mascots are a better marketing tool than any flyer, email, or promotional booth for developing a devoted consumer base. They are the brand personified and *kawaii*-ified, a walking, talking, and, most importantly, friendly database.

While these mascots are more interactive than their self-oriented cousins, their flexibility and success in embodying clearly *kawaii* characteristics varies greatly. Often referred to as *yuru kyara*, or ‘light, weak characters’, these mascots stand clearly apart from the artfully simple, abstractable mascots of Sanrio. This “weakness” derives from the fact that they are typically created by amateur, local, or in-house artists, particularly in the case of companies. With a clear marketing goal at their core, instead of general adorableness, their designs are prone to becoming ham-fisted, esoteric mishmashes of references to this goal. *Yuru kyara*’s names are often some kind of pun that reminds the audience of their appearance, parent organization, or hometown; their design a complex clashing of symbols that come across like a last-minute submission for an art class’ collage assignment.

A definitive example of such a mascot is Bunkakki, the Hiroshima Culture Festival’s *yuru kyara* mascot (fig 8). His name is a blend of two Japanese words: *bunka*, culture; and *kakki*, shellfish or oyster. The shell of the oyster that makes up his body, and is part of his name, references how the animal is a famous dish and export of Hiroshima. Furthermore, the oyster shell is outlined in blue, his arms extending the line to create a ひ (*hi*) shape, the first character sound in *Hi*-roshima. Even further, his head is adorned with a maple leaf, referencing the shape of a famous Hiroshima snack cake, *momiji*.



Fig. 8 – Bunkakki out on the town. Note the orange *momiji*, oyster shell body, and the blue ♪ outline

Bunkakki's structure, purpose, and identity are utterly defined by and tied to the culture of Hiroshima. This deeply specific design and utilization process is unique to *yuru kyara*, who are inextricable from their company, initiative, or region.

Service-oriented mascots that are cleanly designed, along the lines of their self-oriented cousins, are much less memorable than their confusingly complex siblings. Their range in visual accessibility is vital to the success of these mascots. Though it may take time to completely decipher a particularly bizarre service-oriented mascot, each symbol or reference does eventually make sense when examined in context, like with Bunkakki. This depth of connection, though achieved through a cluttered design, is part of their power. As Occhi explains, “a strong narrative is crucial for their success.” due to the fact that they are competing for their audience's attention in a market crowded with not only other *yuru kyara*, but self-oriented mascots as well.²⁵ By building such an undeniable

²⁵ Ibid., 120.

connection through a host of images and references, they become memorably complex.

Based on their clumsy behavior, pun-names, and bizarre designs, one might assume that these mascots are embarrassing, goofy, and poor representations of the importance of their parent companies. In fact, this goofiness is purposeful, and the key to their success as uniquely subversive figures. First, let us examine how this lightheartedness affects these mascots. While their level of knowledge would typically place them in a teaching role *above* their audience, thus make them deserving of respect within the Japanese social structure, their personalities and inherent appearance pushes them from a teacher position into one that exists outside of the typically defined social hierarchy at play in Japanese society. Though they know enough about the inner workings and goals of their company to be a high-ranking official, they behave like a silly child. They joke around, speak casually, and participate in games and events in real life where they often are unable to properly perform the physical task at hand due to the size and structure of their costumed selves. They are supremely approachable, and play on their *kawaii*, childlike nature to appeal to their audience.

Companies or organizations employing the use of such a mascot intentionally create them and ‘play’ them as a goofy, yet knowledgeable character. These organizations recognize the well-documented strictness inherent in Japanese society, how it can prohibit engagement with their brand, and thus actively seek to circumnavigate it through these adorable characters. Unconstrained by a system that confers respect based upon status and requires formality when speaking with those more knowledgeable than oneself, *yuru kyara* discard the social anxieties at play in Japanese society. By establishing a comfortable and even soothing relationship with their audience, *yuru kyara*

transmit important knowledge about their parent organization, which they personify and represent to the world while also bringing a smile to their faces. The positive effects of viewing mascot-related materials are well documented, from their healing properties to their escapist tendencies.

Service-oriented mascots are an easily mimicked and appealing marketing form because they are typically a low-budget endeavor destined to be popular should the organization achieve the right level of *kawaii*. There are also a great way for an organization to condense their message and ideals into an approachable package. The accessibility of this mascot form has directly influenced their adoption by local governments and prefectures throughout Japan. Many of these smaller towns hope to “promote their identities and generate more income” by creating a cute, emblematic mascot of their hometown or one of its more well known features.²⁶



Fig. 9 - Kumamon of Kumamoto prefecture who brought in \$120 million in revenue in his first year.²⁷

²⁶ Sittiphan Jiyavorananda et al., "Elucidation of Factors Predicting the Impression of 'Yuru-sa' in Japanese Yuru-kyara Mascot Characters," *International Journal of Affective Engineering* 15, no. 3 (2016): 231.

²⁷ Philip Brator, "Mascots Bear Cash for Local Authorities," *The Japan Times*, January 13, 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/01/13/national/mascots-bear-cash-for-local-authorities/#.XFSQ-uHYmF>

The sheer financial success of some of the mascots in this category like the internationally popular Kumamon from Kumamoto prefecture (fig. 9), is enough to catch any official's attention. However, the recognition of this mascot form as a useful tool for stuffy organizations to appeal directly to the public's hearts in a rigid societal structure is the core of their appeal. This mascot category is so appealing and recognized as useful for information dissemination that foreign embassies in Japan have also adopted the trend as a tool for furthering international relations.

II. Trend as a Tool

In recent years, a variety of embassies and consulates in Japan have begun to employ service-oriented mascots in various materials, both in real life and online, for different goals. Ecuador, Finland, Israel, and the United States all have mascots, though most notable and actively used are those of Israel and the United States.²⁸ These two embassies created complete promotional web series featuring the mascots, publishing the finished content on their respective YouTube pages. Israel's series "Isn't it Good! Israel - Saki and Noriko's Sister Journey" (いいね！イスラエル～咲と典子の姉妹旅行), focuses on changing the common Japanese perception of the country as one in constant strife and promoting tourism there. Shaloum-chan, the Israeli embassy mascot, occasionally breaks in between scenes in the series to provide more detailed cultural information (see fig. 10 and 11). A 'Peace Ambassador' dove holding an olive branch,



Fig. 10 – Shaloum-chan in *kirigumi* (costume form)



Fig. 11 - Shaloum-chan as he appears in the web series いいね！イスラエル～咲と典子の姉妹旅行

²⁸ Chris Carlier, "Embassy Mascots in Japan," Mondo Mascots, June 17, 2017, <http://mondomascots.com/index.php/2017/06/17/embassy-mascots-in-japan/>.

Shaloum-chan is punnily named using a combination of the Hebrew word *shalom* - peace - and the Japanese *oum* - parrot.²⁹ His design is a clear blend of Israeli and Japanese imagery - his head is adorned with an Israeli flag, the blush on his cheeks is reminiscent of the Japanese flag. However, outside of providing “fun facts” about his parent country, Shaloum-chan has no active role in the series’ events, other than being a *kawaii* interlude to the series’ drama. He only appears as an animated, essentially voiceless tour guide. What acts as his ‘voice’ is a high-pitched but soft babble, reminiscent of the parent and teacher voices in the Charlie Brown animated show and holiday specials.

Despite not having an active hand (or wing) in the sisters’ adventure, Shaloum-chan is clearly a service-oriented mascot as he provides a wide variety of interesting information throughout the series, but offsets his deep knowledge with his cute appearance and playful, clumsy persona. The United States’ series, on the other hand, prominently features their mascot, Tom the Jellybean, as a main character with his own distinct and playful voice. Tom more actively embodies his mascot family in his series than Shaloum-chan in his, directly interacting and becoming involved with the other characters in his series, though Shaloum-chan is more active as a real-life character than Tom, based on the bird’s active Twitter account. However, as the U.S.’s series gives this study more crafted, Tom-featuring content to analyze, his role in the series is the focus of this chapter. Despite the range in these mascots’ agency and realm of application, their deep integration with their embassies’ diplomatic goals begs the question: what is the role of popular culture in modern international relations with Japan?

²⁹ May Masangkay, “Embassies in Japan using mascots as 'cultural ambassadors',” *The Japan Times*, October 18, 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/18/national/embassies-using-mascots-as-ambassadors/#.XFowFeHYrnH>

First, let us examine Tom and exactly how he fits the definition of a Japanese mascot – specifically the service-oriented variety. Tom (sometimes written 豆夢 – *Tomu* - “bean” and “dream,” but also sometimes in *katakana*, the Japanese alphabet for loan words/names, as トム – simply “*Tomu*”), is an ‘eternal’ freshman exchange student from Alaska.³⁰ His typical appearance is that of an orange jelly bean wearing big red glasses, with simple, black, stick-figure arms and legs (see fig. 12 and 13). Though his appearance



Fig. 12 - Tom in animated form



Fig. 13 - Tom in *kirigumi* form, encouraging Noriko in the first episode of *のりこ留学物語*

is not as unusual as other mascots, and does not reference any common imagery of the United States, he is often pictured holding an American flag, a Japanese flag, or a combination of the two. He makes up for his simple design with a clear personality, speaking in a high-pitched voice and consistently making jokes in voice clips on his ‘about’ page. On this page, Tom’s reported purpose as the “social media and goodwill ambassador” for the American embassy is to “introduce and teach about American culture, Japanese-American diplomatic relations, and study abroad to the U.S. in a casual tone” (translation mine). This job description is almost the exact definition of service-oriented mascots developed previously following in-depth research of the mascot trend.³¹

³⁰ “アメリカ大使館 公式ソーシャルメディア.” American Center Japan. Accessed October 3, 2018. <https://americancenterjapan.com/tom/>.

Tom is one of the more artfully rendered service-oriented mascots, but maintains an element of goofiness inherent to the form. While he exists to be an approachable source of information, his goofiness keeps him from moving into a teacher position and thus a place deserving of respect. He sits definitively in the subversive social space that successful *yuru kyara* do, able to act as a casual, familiarly formed mouthpiece for the embassy - and thus the United States - while connecting more personally with the Japanese public.

Tom's appearance and participation in "Noriko's Study Abroad Story" (のりこ留学物語) categorizes him as a definitive example of service-oriented mascots. The series is narrated by and involves Tom as a supporting character to the titular Noriko, a college student applying to study abroad in the U.S. for a year. The web series follows her through the application process, and serves as a step-by-step guide for the bureaucratic and emotional stages of preparing to study abroad. Tom actively comforts, supports, and guides Noriko through these stages, from the day she decides to study abroad until she steps onto her plane to the United States. Noriko's role is that of an audience surrogate, though for a specific audience of future or current Japanese study abroad applicants. She expresses all future students' possible feelings and asks all their relevant questions, allowing the audience to personally process their emotions, express them to a sympathetic ear in the form of the embassy's *kawaii* ambassador, and receive pertinent information. Throughout the web series, and the application process, Tom embodies the main goals of a *yuru kyara* mascot, which is to educate while entertaining.

In the first episode of the series, we meet Noriko as she first announces her desire to study abroad in the U.S. However, her father rebuts her so harshly as to make her run

³¹ Ibid.

to her room and cry.³² When she tries to get support from an upperclassman friend, he tells her that people who study abroad are annoying and condescending to others, and that doing so would make her late in doing annual job hunting interviews and applications.³³ After this introductory, emotionally intense three minutes, Noriko is brought to tears in a public park, which attracts the attention and sympathy of Tom - present here in costumed form. When he asks what is wrong after introducing himself as the goodwill and social media ambassador for the U.S. embassy, Noriko cries that “nobody supports her.”³⁴ Tom encourages her in his eternally chipper, playful tone and manner of speech with a Thomas Edison quote, saying that it is impossible to accomplish anything “if you just give up when something stands in your way.” Just because her family and friends discouraged her the first time does not mean that she should dismiss her own desire altogether.

Maintaining his role as a service-oriented mascot, Tom not only emotionally supports Noriko, but also gives her possible solutions to her dilemma, while providing key information that may help her in convincing her parents to support her study abroad dream. Tom encourages her to consider what she wants to “accomplish in the U.S.,” and what the experience would give her that would be beneficial for her future plans.³⁵ Explaining her reasons for wanting to go, and showing how serious she is would most likely bring her parents around, he explains. He then gently transitions into marketing mode. Having given her the emotional support of a friend and endearing himself to her, Tom tells her about a study abroad fair called “America Expo” that is sponsored by the

³² “のりこ留学物語 第一話 「私、アメリカに留学したい！」,” *のりこ留学物語*, YouTube video, 5:24, posted by “アメリカ大使館・領事館 US Embassy Tokyo & Consulates in Japan,” April 4, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HzZtTRIXM8&index=1&list=PL2jr7edYFQv_9ZhcS9dTQm76Suym0q4I6

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

U.S. Embassy in Japan, where those interested in study abroad can get more detailed and specific information about universities and the experience overall. Like targeted advertising with a tender twist, Tom seamlessly combines support, friendship, and education, all in his very first scene.

Countries' mascots serve as avatars with a "Japanese feel" -- they present a face that follows the norms of the domestic *yuru kyara* mascots Japanese citizens know well, yet *these* represent a foreign country. By speaking through a Japanese-styled mouthpiece, foreign powers gain the opportunity to promote their policies and initiatives to the Japanese public more gently and familiarly. Tsutsui writes about this notion of a Japanese "feel" in a more universal way, referencing Iwabuchi Kōichi's divisive idea that all "cultural products... have some sort of odor" that relates them to their country of origin.³⁶ Iwabuchi argues that the Japanese odor, unlike that of American products, quickly reminds international consumers of their likely painful history with Japan and thus is undesirable.³⁷ However, in the case of embassies employing the distinctly Japanese form of *yuru kyara*, this Japanese 'odor' is exactly what they desire. As both aforementioned embassies are appealing to a solely Japanese audience, they wish to impart the idea that the 'odor' that hangs around self- and service-oriented mascots is compatible with their own culture's 'odors,' and is not perceived as a "stink," as Tsutsui refers to it.³⁸

It is possible to argue that both mascot forms, despite being Japanese in origin, are covered more with the scent of *kawaii* culture, separate from that of some idea of Japanese-ness. Anne Allison argues that Pokémon's international success derives from its identity as an internationally popular but "culturally neutered" or "*de-odorized*" goods

³⁶ Tsutsui, 41.

³⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁸ Ibid.

exported by Japan.³⁹ As primary examples of the self-oriented mascot family, both Pokémon and Hello Kitty do come across as uniquely odorless icons; there is little about them one could point to and call inherently Japanese, apart from the type of cuteness they embody (*kawaii*), the Japanese innovation on the form. To claim that the cultural power such characters give Japan is inextricably tied to some idea of Japanese-ness, too, is difficult, though the fact that Japan does control *kawaii* culture (for the time being) is enough to make that power solely Japan's. Clearly, foreign nations interacting with Japan see it as a powerful domestic public relations format, and seek to borrow some of that power for themselves in diplomatic relations with the power-owning country.

Part of this borrowing is attributable to the fact that foreigners, and their government's embassies and consulates, seem to inspire anxiety among Japanese people. While this may be partially attributable to the linguistic barriers foreign embassies pose, the strict social hierarchy extant in Japan also exacerbates this anxiety. Formal institutions require very formal speech in Japanese – known as *keigo* – that even Japanese executives must practice extensively. The U.S. Embassy's aforementioned web series portrays this apprehension multiple times through its nine episodes. Paralyzed with her fears about not understanding English well enough, Noriko reaches a point in episode three where she almost abandons her dream of studying abroad in the U.S. Though she and Tom initially feud over Noriko's initial unwillingness to be resolute, they reconcile when he introduces her to his friend, Japanese astronaut Naoko Yamazaki, who studied abroad in the U.S. and encourages Noriko not to so easily give in to anxiety.⁴⁰

³⁹ Allison, "Portable Monsters and Commodity Cuteness," 383, (emphasis mine).

⁴⁰ “のりこ留学物語 第三話 その2 「アメリカの大学に出願！」,” のりこ留学物語, YouTube video, 6:50, posted by “アメリカ大使館・領事館 US Embassy Tokyo & Consulates in Japan,” January 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjwrK23he-Y&t=1s>

In a later, almost ten-minute episode, Tom appears mostly as an animated guide in the corner of Noriko's computer screen, taking her step-by-step through the complex process of completing a DS-160, a personal information form necessary for non-immigrant visa applications. She initially panics due to its length, as it is extensive and takes almost one and a half hours to complete with English-only instructions.⁴¹ Not only does Tom inform Noriko that she can save her progress on the form and return to it later, but he also shows her (and thus the audience of future and current Japanese study abroad students) how to switch the website's setting so that all hover-over text gives a Japanese translation of what information is needed. Throughout the video, he lingers in the bottom left hand corner, tapping his feet or just smiling soothingly, ready to jump in and explain any unclear points that go unaddressed in the form in his consistently playful Japanese.

The U.S. and Israeli embassies' web series featuring their mascots reiterates the tightly knit nature of young girl (*shōjo*) culture, *kawaii*, and mascots. Women have been critical in the consumption of various Japanese pop culture art forms, specifically anime and manga, and are traditionally linked with the *kawaii* culture that defines the entirety of mascots.⁴² Thus, that both embassies' web series feature female, audience-surrogate main characters is a logical and intended marketing move. With women most consistently consuming mascot-branded material, to target them with *more* of this content is to ensure viewership and interest in that material's message in a sizable portion of the embassies' audience. The these series skillfully recognize mascot use's history and cultural

⁴¹“ オンラインビザ申請書DS-160の作成方法 米国大使館公式ビデオ”, ” のりこ留学物語, YouTube video, 9:49, posted by “アメリカ大使館・領事館 US Embassy Tokyo & Consulates in Japan,” December 23, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhVxexKxjOY&list=PL2jr7edYFQv_9ZhC9dTQm76Suym0q4I6&index=5

⁴² Tsutsui, 16.

connections and seek to use it to their advantage, promoting a peaceful and culture-rich Israel, and a challenging but rewarding study abroad experience in the United States.

The U.S. Embassy's series further exhibits how embassies in Japan are tailoring the mascot form to their individual goals. "Noriko's Study Abroad Story" was made to break down a complicated system and make it as least anxiety-inducing as possible, remove barriers that could discourage future applicants, and thus bolster Japanese study abroad to the U.S. According to Open Doors, a study abroad statistics report released by the Institute of International Education, the number of Japanese students studying in the U.S. has been in decline for almost two decades, with an overall decline of 57%.⁴³ The 2008 global financial crisis seemed to cause the most precipitous decline in Japanese study abroad, with the following three years averaging about a 14% decline each year.⁴⁴ Even as this decline's drastic nature decreased beginning in 2011, the rate stayed negative.⁴⁵ According to private correspondence with a U.S. Embassy Tokyo officer, study abroad is important to "maintain[ing] the long-term health of the U.S.-Japan Alliance," so the embassy clearly took an active role in combating the erosion of study abroad numbers.⁴⁶ Alongside Tom, the U.S. Embassy reported its "commitment to expanding exchange opportunities for American and Japanese students" in 2015, reiterating its standing initiatives focused on study abroad statistic improvement.⁴⁷

Embassies in Japan are clearly beginning to integrate mascot use with existing diplomatic

⁴³ "About," TeamUP, October 16, 2017, Accessed April 19, 2019, <https://teamup-usjapan.org/about/>.

⁴⁴ "All Places of Origin: Previous Years," IIE, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin/All-Places-of-Origin>.

⁴⁵ "Places of Origin," IIE, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin>.

⁴⁶ Noyuri Ishikawa (Cultural Affairs Officer, U.S. Embassy Tokyo), in discussion with the author, email, January 2019.

⁴⁷ "Open Doors Report Highlights Japan-U.S. Student Exchange," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan, November 16, 2015, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://jp.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/official-reports/open-doors-report-highlights-japan-u-s-student-exchange/>.

goals, establishing mascots as an active form of diplomatic communications and thus creating a new type of mascots.

Given these examples of Tom and Shaloum-chan, embassy mascots are a markedly different branch within the service-oriented mascot family, created to overcome specific anxieties that Japanese people may experience in relation to these foreign countries. Be it the consistent language barriers and performance anxiety that Noriko must overcome, or the negative perceptions of and general lack of knowledge about Israel that Saki brings with her on her journey, the respective embassies have created *kawaii*, Japanese-styled versions of themselves to address these country-specific concerns. An even more newly minted Afghanistan embassy mascot, the cuddly Bahar-chan (fig. 14),



Fig. 14 – Bahar-chan, the Afghanistan Embassy in Japan’s cuddly mascot

demonstrates how this new mascot form is expanding in its popularity in the realm of soft diplomacy with Japan. The embassy reportedly tweeted that their purpose in creating him was to “change the public image of Afghanistan in Japan,” from that of a war-torn and plagued by terrorist attacks to one probably along the lines of the image the Israeli embassy pushes with Shaloum-chan.⁴⁸ These mascots’ specificity to their international

creators sets them apart as a new development of the mascot family tree and yet firmly roots them in the realm of the service-oriented mascots. As a good service-oriented mascot, they are inextricable from their parent organizations, education-oriented, *kawaii*, and deeply knowledgeable. However, they are each applied to fulfill a specific educational goal that the embassy has decided to focus on, as opposed to being more broadly applied to all embassy activities.

These helpful, soothing creations are the newest addition to the larger mascot trend, having only come into being in 2013. Though the bulk of mascot-specific history is modern, dating back not much further than the late-1970s, the trend's references and presence in Japanese culture is much older. The earliest form of mascots can be found in 12th century Japanese art, and are a far cry from the *kawaii* hordes that populate Japan today. The effectiveness of these modern mascots is rooted deeply in Japanese cultural history. Understanding the historical and cultural context that produced the predecessors to modern mascots makes it possible to understand the longevity and cultural significance of the modern iterations.

III. Historical and Cultural Contextualization

Currently, daily news reporting and the internet at large treat the Japanese mascot trend as a strange, recent, and solely Japanese one, just another form of 'weird Japan' – a

⁴⁸ Reiji Yoshida, "Afghan Embassy Plans to Deploy Mascots," *The Japan Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/13/national/soliciting-votes-afghanistan-embassy-plans-deploy-japanese-style-mascot-soften-war-torn-image/#.XLuGmOtKgWo>.

phrase thrown around in internet blogs and on social media in response to seemingly random and incomprehensible goods, services, or events that originate in Japan.

Exoticization of Japanese creativity aside, this trend is anything but random or confined to Japanese participation. While the use of mascots by pharmaceutical companies and foreign embassies can seem odd to the foreign eye, the trend is rooted in early Japanese art and folklore, molded by post-World War II economic and cultural trends.

Understanding the true cultural heft of mascots as a modern iteration of an early moralistic art form demonstrates why foreign embassies' strategic adoption of this form leverages the cultural heft for diplomatic purposes.

Popular art dating as far back as the 12th century inspired modern forms like anime/manga as well as modern mascots. William Tsutsui repeats an often-made connection between the nine-hundred-year-old scrolls of the *Chōjūjinbutsu giga* ('caricature of animal-human characters'), *kibyōshi* ('yellow cover') woodblock-printed "satirical" cartoons, and modern Japanese graphic novels.⁴⁹ As an extension of the anime/manga industry given their interweaving artistic styles, the mascot industry has also taken inspiration from the creatures represented in these works. Occhi further elucidates the connection between Japanese mascots, and the anthropomorphized animals and *yōkai* (folkloric demons) depicted in the aforementioned scrolls as well as other texts.⁵⁰ The *Chōjūjinbutsu giga* exemplifies an early form of a prevalent trend in the mascot world: animal anthropomorphization. The anthropomorphization emerges, Occhi argues, from both Shintoism and Buddhism, the dominant religious systems of Japan.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Tsutsui, 24.

⁵⁰ Occhi, 113.

⁵¹ Ibid., 114-5



Fig. 15 – From the *Chōjūjinbutsu giga*; a frog offers a large leaf to a rabbit, to act as an umbrella. Both stand on their hind legs, and their body language is human-esque in emotion and nature.

Shintoism's belief in every living and nonliving thing being imbued with *kami* (typically translated as 'god' but is a more loose, spiritual concept), and Buddhism's "two-... or three-dimensional representation" of ancestors mesh and create, for the religious, an interconnected web that spiritually connects each individual to every person, animal, object they interact with.⁵² The strength of this web was such that people believed they could be reincarnated into any living or non-living thing. For an artist working under the influence of these belief systems, it would be a logical, though whimsical, leap to depict animals performing human sports and even religious ceremonies; it was possible that, in a past life, these beings had enjoyed these activities as humans.⁵³ At times both playful and somber, the series of four scrolls captures the complexity of the animals' character.

Occhi also analyzes how the *Tsukumogami emaki*, art scrolls of the ninety-nine Gods, created by Shingon Buddhists circa the 15th century portray an early form of what

⁵² Ibid., 115.

⁵³ Ibid., 117.

this study has identified as the service-oriented mascot.⁵⁴ The ‘ninety-nine Gods’ depicted in these popular scrolls were objects that had come to life solely through of the strength of their hatred for their previous owners. Due to age or having been damaged, the owners had thrown away the objects, but thoughtlessly so. The everyday object bodies of the wicked *tsukumogami* wandered the earth seeking revenge against their owners for discarding them so easily.⁵⁵ Like a shared ancestor of the two modern mascot families, these demons were designed to be everywhere, like the self-oriented mascot, but for a clear purpose, like the service-oriented. Thus they embody the two roles that modern mascot designers have separated into distinct categories.

While the *tsukumogami* and self-oriented mascots were both designed to be as present as possible in the audience’s minds, they have distinct purposes. Self-oriented mascots seek to sell their unique image to their audiences however they can, and thus end up attempting to cover every possible surface a consumer can buy, as noted earlier in Chapter I. However, the self-oriented mascot’s goal of omnipresence is a modern, capitalist take on the *tsukumogami*’s, which was to ensure that their moral purpose would remain and be constantly reiterated in their audience’s minds. To achieve such a goal, the *tsukumogami* ‘borrowed’ the appearance of household goods like lanterns and umbrellas (see fig. 16 and 17), anthropomorphizing them with, bulging eyes and gaping mouths, but typically maintaining their original forms to ensure the connection between demon and everyday good.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.



Fig. 16 – A *Chōchin-obake* (paper lantern ghost), one type of *tsukumogami*

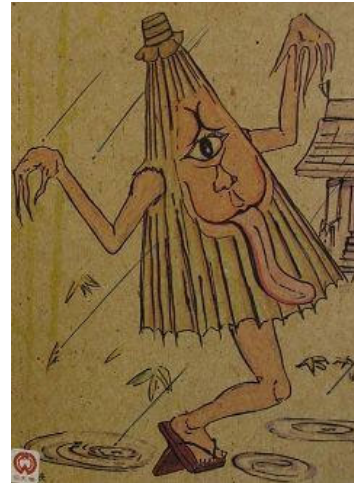


Fig. 17 – A *kasa obake* (umbrella ghost), another form of *tsukumogami*

The very existence of *tsukumogami* was “an injunction against the thoughtless disposal of unwanted household objects” by Buddhist artists, though conveyed in a mass-consumable and entertaining way.⁵⁶ So successful was their attempt at imparting this moral teaching that vestiges of the idea of *thoughtfully* disposing of objects, persists in modern Japanese society. Occhi references the funeral rights held for “animals and various objects, including... needles” as examples of the lasting impact of this moral code.⁵⁷ The most internationally known version of this thoughtful disposing of household goods can be seen in the KonMari method, as created by Marie Kondo. By “giving sincere thanks to an item,” she says, people tidying up will feel less guilty about throwing away an old or sentimental item.⁵⁸ Clearly, by weaving the *tsukumogami* into their audiences’ everyday life, Japanese artists used an early form of the service-oriented mascot to entertainingly impart an important moral lesson that still exists in modern Japanese society.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 118.

⁵⁸ Joanna Moorhead, “Marie Kondo: How to Clear Out Sentimental Clutter,” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jan/14/how-to-declutter-your-life-marie-kondo-spark-joy>.

Popular mascots of today may have descended from such historically fearsome creatures as the *tsukumogami*, but they have discarded their claws, fangs, and taste for human flesh in preference of neotenous proportions and preciously clumsy behavior. Though now “relegated to the realm of *kyara*-style decorations” after percolating through Japanese religious and cultural trends, this defanging process began long before the modern era, with *tsukumogami* “giv[ing] up their evil habits” and becoming Buddhist in their own origin stories.⁵⁹ The process begun by religion has today been completed by the all-consuming wave of *kawaii* culture, which has subsumed many once-murderous *yōkai*.



Fig. 18 – Kapp’n the Kappa in his boat

A *kappa*, a frog-like creature known for drowning and eating humans that dared tread near its home, has been *kawaii*-ified in the Nintendo 3DS game *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. Kapp’n (a mix of *kappa* and an abbreviated form of ‘captain’) carries the player across the ocean to a special island in a little motorboat, singing songs on the way about his family and their antics to pass the time. Like Grimm’s fairy tales re-imagined into the

⁵⁹ Occhi, 118.

popular and child-friendly Disney movies, Japanese demons and trickster creatures have become lovable characters primed for consumption, with an added dimension of nostalgia for the Japanese consumers who grew up hearing or being told folktales featuring *yōkai*.

The use of a representative mascot, Hello Kitty, by *shōjo* (young girl) culture in the 1970s created the modern notions of *kawaii* and mascot culture. As previously mentioned, Hello Kitty is often pinpointed as the matriarch of modern mascots, but her creation signified an important shift in mascot culture overall with the movement from a solely domestic focus to a globally-minded one. The very history of Hello Kitty's parent company, Sanrio, demonstrates this shift. Before developing Kitty-san, the company rebranded themselves from Yamanashi Silk to the "linguistically ambiguous" Sanrio – an active throwing off of their Japanese odor.⁶⁰ Their flagship mascot at her core has barely any Japanese trappings. Her name and that of her nuclear family, White, are clearly English-language names, and they all live in London, England, where Kitty-san was born. Though her slightly more detailed "about" page on the Sanrio website makes no explicit mention of their nationality, it does mention that she "has a gift for... English," which could mean it is not her first language.⁶¹ However, with her lack of explicit Japanese-ness, Hello Kitty and her parent company represent the shift of mascots' purpose from purveying morals to being globally marketable and consumable, a side-effect of their participation in the rise of young girl culture.

Using the popularity of *shōjo* as a vehicle, *kawaii* began its ascent to its current dominant cultural position in the early 1970s, long before it began to Disney-fy wicked demons for popular consumption. With the "rising affluence" of this period thanks to the

⁶⁰ Yano, 46. See discussion of the term "odor" in Chapter II.

⁶¹ Sanrio, "Sanrio Timeline," The Official Home of Hello Kitty & Friends, accessed April 20, 2019, <https://www.sanrio.com/timeline>

burgeoning economic bubble, and the beginning of the declining national birth rate, currency grew concentrated in young people - more money was available, and there was less competition for it.⁶² This concentration of cash occurred in a generation when girl culture began to assert femininity in a way perceived as “deviant” in Japanese society.⁶³ Girl culture began to use hard-to-read but cutesy handwriting and active participants made fashion choices that flew in the face of traditional beauty standards, but these transgressive choices remained inherently feminine. This development gave birth to a new type of consumer: financially empowered girls wanting to enact their femininity in new, commercially dependent ways. This economic independence enabled young women’s social independence, and each reinforced and propelled the other to a formidable social and economic force.

Christine Yano argues that, in the first wave of girl culture, participants using Hello Kitty, an innocent childish/girlish icon, did so with “a sense of irony” that commented on the user’s distance from the childlike space Kitty represents.⁶⁴ However, current girl culture is an *unironic* embracing of the girlish and acceptable form of *kawaii*. The use of Hello Kitty ties together these two eras of girl culture in an on-again-off-again relationship. This flexible engagement allows girls to both distance themselves from and also embrace the expectations of their age and gender as it suits any particular moment. *Kawaii* is also used as an acceptable means of escape through the direct embracing of these same expectations, a “temporary state of abnegation” from one’s responsibilities.⁶⁵ By surrounding oneself with *kawaii* and, by extension, character-branded goods, the user

⁶² Yano, 52.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

chooses the world of this specific kind of cuteness for herself; *kawaii* just happens to follow pre-existing expectations for girls, and is thus appropriate for them, and women are allowed to embrace it for nostalgic reasons. The affluence of young people in 1970s and 1980s Japan along with rise of girl culture's popularity cemented *kawaii* as an acceptable performance of gender and escapism, allowing it to rise to the all-consuming cultural wave it is today. The sweetness of *kawaii* has left little of Japanese popular culture untouched, garnering the attention of the broader commercial world, which quickly adopted this sweetness as an effective strategy. Again, there seems to be no corporation or local government that does not have a *kawaii* representative.

In the same way that the Japanese private and public sectors adopted *kawaii* mascots for their own identity formation, foreign embassies in Japan have emulated this strategy by creating their own non-threatening, culturally embedded mascots that serve as mouthpieces for their diplomatic goals. However, an historical analysis of *kawaii*'s shift into the private and public sectors for companies' and prefectural governments' purposes is necessary before one can examine its most recent application to the realm of international relations. It is important to see the use of service-oriented mascots by foreign governments to communicate with Japanese society as the most recent development in a long history of mascot culture in Japan. Foreign powers are taking a step toward accomplishing important goals in communicating their intended messages by leveraging this well-established cultural form.

At this point, no unified narrative of service-oriented mascot history exists. This thesis proposes that this history began in the mid- to late 1990s. Anne Allison refers to a 1999 book on the subject of company mascots by the Japanese advertising agency

Dentsū, wherein the corporation explains their appeal and power, saying that they “accompan[y] the development of a group and becomes part of, and a symbol for, that identity.”⁶⁶ By creating a ‘face’ for the group they represent, they are more likely to be remembered than if they only used a logo of their name. Thus the corporation or prefecture is able to build a more concrete relationship with their audience, and rally around a symbol of their own making. It is notable that mascots first became popular at the commercial level as globally-targeted goods before moving into the domestic Japanese private/public sector. Self-oriented mascots’ popularity and profitability had to be established both at home and around the world before Japanese companies and prefectures could imagine expending funds to employ such a character for their own purposes.

Though the aforementioned Dentsū book references the existence of these mascots, this study has been unable to find any record of the book online, or of any popular mascots before 2006. However, this absence can be explained in a few ways. Service-oriented mascots’ use could have been isolated to a few companies and prefectures, and thus not deemed worth recording as an emerging marketing method. Additionally, it could be that they were in existence and were recorded, but just not in any way currently available online. Thus, the first book to focus entirely on mascots is the *Yuru Kyara no Hon* (The Book of Yuru Kyara), created in 2006 by graphic artist Jun Miura. In it, he coins the term *yuru kyara* (literally ‘weak character’) for these oddly designed and wobbly creatures after noticing their rise and subsequently collecting images of them.⁶⁷ According to an article by the founder of Mondo Mascots, the leading

⁶⁶ Allison, “Portable Monsters,” 387.

online catalogue and resource for the world of service-oriented mascots, the first such mascot to achieve national fame was Hikonyan, an anthropomorphic white cat wearing a samurai helmet, introduced in 2007 to promote Hikone Castle in Hikone, Shiga prefecture.⁶⁸ Considered the progenitor of the service-oriented mascot craze due to his quick rise to fame, Hikonyan immediately attracted large crowds (and their cash) to his appearances at the castle, bringing in a 60% increase in attendance, according to *The Japan Times*.⁶⁹ Both articles claim that a “slew of local governments” quickly developed their own mascots due to his success, so many that the next year, the first gathering of these mascots, the Yuru Chara Festival/Kirigumi Summit, was held in Hikone as an opportunity to recognize and popularize the mascot’s parent localities and businesses.⁷⁰

However, Hikonyan was only the *first* break-out star of the mascot world. His level of commercial success was quickly overwhelmed by that of Kumamon from Kumamoto prefecture, introduced four years later in 2010. A black bear with wide eyes and round red cheeks, his design, like many *yuru kyara*, is “artless,” one *Japan Times* article claims, due to his and other local government’s lack of income and thus initial inability to hire a professional artist to create the mascot.⁷¹ This simplistic and often weird style, as previously mentioned, is what popularized Miura’s term for them - ‘loose’ or ‘weak’ characters. In 2011, Kumamon brought his home prefecture “only” ¥2.56 billion (\$22.8 million) in increased revenue, a number that jumped to ¥11.8 billion (\$105 million) within the first six months of 2012.⁷² The mascot’s sudden increase in earnings

⁶⁷ Daniel Krieger, “The Busy Lives of Japan’s Super Furry Creatures,” March 3, 2011, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2011/03/03/lifestyle/the-busy-lives-of-japans-super-furry-creatures/#.XGsboOHYmE>

⁶⁸ Carlier, “The Strange, Enduring Charm.”

⁶⁹ Krieger, “The Busy Lives.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Brasor, “Mascots Bear Cash for Local Authorities.”

occurred because Kumamon was redesigned and made more *kawaii* in the lead-up to the first annual Yuru Chara Grand Prix popularity contest, held in 2011, which he won. Though no images exist of his original design, Kumamon's body was reportedly rounded out, and behavior made sillier by the actor portraying him.⁷³ It is clear his new design is what won him the contest, and thus national attention, because it is his new design that appears on the Grand Prix's website under their list of previous winners, as well as in other articles reporting his win (fig. 18).



Fig. 18 - A screenshot from the Yuru Kyara Grand Prix's page for their 2011 contestants and winner

Such a level of excitement around mascots and the sharp spike in the production of new ones could not last forever; in 2014, with mascot numbers booming to newfound highs, the Japanese Finance Ministry announced a “nationwide crackdown” on their proliferation, claiming that their current numbers were a “waste of public funds.”⁷⁴ One mascot alone apparently cost its employers around 8,300 USD and only made five public

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Gan, “The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Municipal Mascot.”

appearances a year.⁷⁵ Osaka alone had 92 distinct mascots, for varied purposes that the then-governor Ichiro Matsui claimed led to a dissolution of clear messaging.⁷⁶ The Finance Ministry's announcement led to international interest, with news outlets from CNN to the Sydney Herald picking up the story and reporting a 'mascot cull,' as well as foretelling the end of the trend altogether. However, in the midst of the world media claiming that the age of prefectural mascots had come to an end, the mascot trend as a whole had reached such a height of popularity that it made an unexpected expansion into the world of international relations.

The development of foreign embassy mascots elevated the importance of Japanese service-oriented mascot use from a curious, domestic trend worth examining for its societal role to a trend that could affect international relations and Japanese citizens' perceptions of foreign countries. Israel's Shaloum-chan was the first foreign embassy mascot to be introduced. Contrary to his cute and 'artful' design, he was not created either professionally or solely by the Israeli embassy. Shaloum-chan was the eventual victor of the embassy's heavily publicized, mostly Facebook-dependent 2013 *yuru kyara* competition, and was selected from an initial pool of 500 embassy follower submissions.⁷⁷ While additional input from a panel of embassy-selected judges was also gathered (choosing their top 5 mascots based on "Popularity and Professionalism"), most of the 2012-2013 competition was based on follower engagement, with Shaloum-chan coming out on top.⁷⁸ Since then, he has appeared regularly in both online promotional

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ "'Shalo-um-chan' - Our Embassy's Official Yuru Chara," Embassy of Israel in Japan.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

videos (both in animated and costume form) and at real-life events that tend to focus on culturally significant topics.

The year following the Israeli embassy's heavy publicization of their competition on their Japanese-language website and Facebook page, the American embassy introduced Tom, a similarly 'artfully' designed mascot. According to private correspondence with the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, they introduced Tom with the intention of "encouraging more young Japanese to study in the United States," a step which both strengthens and deepens the diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Japan through the "develop[ment of] next-generation leaders."⁷⁹ As previously mentioned, study abroad from Japan to the U.S. has been on a steady decline, and further research reveals that, in 2013, CULCON (U.S.-Japan Conference on Culture and Educational Interchange) "established an Education Task Force (ETF) that issued a Report and Recommendations" to a variety of bodies involved in promoting and carrying out study abroad between the two countries.⁸⁰ That report encouraged these bodies to more actively promote and expand available study abroad programs in both nations, citing how vital study abroad is to maintaining the U.S.-Japan relationship. Likely, with this directive, recent reports about mascots circulating in international media (following the announcement of the mascot cull), and the widely publicized selection process for the Israeli embassy's mascot, U.S. Embassy Tokyo saw creating a mascot and web series centered around study abroad to be both a culturally engaging and policy-driven endeavor.

As the Goodwill and Social Media Ambassador to Japan, Tom travels to middle and high schools as well as other, study-abroad focused events to promote study abroad

⁷⁹ Ishikawa, discussion.

⁸⁰ "About," TeamUp.

as early as possible. Though only active around Tokyo, given that he is associated with the embassy there, he is always joined by a representative of the embassy, who distributes information regarding both study abroad and the services offered by the embassy. He features prominently in the previously analyzed web series focusing on guiding students through preparing to study abroad, is handed out in plushie and keychain form, and even appears on calendars distributed by the embassy, which feature “helpful English phrases” to make English seem simple and the jump across the Pacific not so long.⁸¹

This active marketing by the U.S. Embassy through “U.S. messages tailored to resonate with local audiences” raises questions about the future of U.S.-Japan relations.⁸² What does this step of “leveraging local culture” for international goals mean for diplomatic relations in the future?⁸³ How will this affect diplomatic relations moving forward? Will we see more and more domestic pop culture forms being reproduced by foreign entities, or is this a passing instance unique to U.S.-Japan relations? Furthermore, what does this co-option of a Japanese form by a foreign entity say about the soft power of the mascot trend, and that of Japan overall?

IV. Conclusion

⁸¹ Ishikawa, discussion.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

In the past decade, embassy mascots have emerged as one of the most innovative and high profile tools of international relations in East Asia. While who controls the soft power they embody, their longevity, and even effectiveness is debatable, their significance both as a diplomatic tool of communication and a domestic tool of escapism is not. Internationally, mascots are significant in the realm of direct international relations between countries and other countries' citizenry – otherwise known as public diplomacy.⁸⁴ Mascots are not used in inter-country relations, but in country to *people* relations, bypassing state institutions to relay foreign messages directly. In this way, mascots are significant as an actual form of soft power. Unlike oft-cited examples of the idea, like Coca Cola or popular films, mascots can interact with and respond to the world; they are not static, non-state entities, but mutable and interactive beings who exist to spread whatever message their country wishes to spread. In the realm of Japanese cultural studies, examining mascots as the foot soldiers of *kawaii* reveals something greater about Japanese pop culture and how it chooses to represent the world. As Tsutsui argues, there is no thing as “just” a representation; the representation itself is significant in how it portrays the represented idea or object. Thus, the fact that *kawaii* culture could form into an all-consuming wave, that it was *allowed* by domestic consumers to reach this level of power, reveals some truths about how Japan imagines or would *like to* imagine itself. Therefore, mascots transcend the label of a fleetingly curious pop culture fad, and instead exist as an example of what is the uniquely Japanese perception of Japanese culture and the possible future of international relations.

⁸⁴ Koichi Iwabuchi, “Pop-culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding, and the Question of ‘International Cultural Exchange’,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* vol. 21, no. 4 (2015): 419.

Recalling that the Japanese word *kawaii* implies a vulnerability meant to incite the viewer into caring for the subject, and that *kawaii* is the dominant form of Japanese culture, its popularity suggests that consumers of *kawaii* culture long for such vulnerability. Japanese society is notoriously high-pressure; *The Japan Times* recently reported that suicide overtook cancer as the leading cause of death for children between 10 and 14, and that suicide has been the leading cause of death for those aged 15-39 since 2012.⁸⁵ Demands for success can begin as early as kindergarten, as not getting into the ‘right’ school can determine a student’s entire academic future. This educational culture is dubbed as an “escalator schools” one, due to the fact that students can get on and one point and ride their way to their way to the top – with no opportunities off or, notably, on along the way.⁸⁶ Middle and high school students spend long hours at *juku*, cram schools, in preparation for high school and university entrance exams. After a brief respite in university, new graduates face a harsh work culture. In 2013, a woman died from heart failure after putting in 159 hours of overtime work in the month before her passing.⁸⁷ Another notable case was of a woman who killed herself in 2015, after logging hundreds of overtime hours in the months leading to her death.⁸⁸ 24-year-old Matsuri Takahashi posted on social media, “I am physically and mentally shattered,” before her death on Christmas Day.⁸⁹ Japan’s harsh expectations of its workers is clearly to blame in these

⁸⁵ Kyodo, “Suicide Now Leading Cause of Death Among Children Aged 10 to 14 in Japan,” *The Japan Times*, March 22, 2019, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/22/national/suicide-now-leading-cause-death-among-children-aged-10-14-japan/?utm_source=Daily+News+Updates&utm_campaign=35977d63c5-Saturday_email_updates23_03_2019&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c5a6080d40-35977d63c5-333097457

⁸⁶ Teru Clavel, “Prepping for University Straight From the Crib,” *The Japan Times*, February 16, 2014, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/02/16/issues/prepping-for-university-straight-from-the-crib/#.XJgrDBNKgWo>

⁸⁷ Justin McCurry, “Japanese woman ‘dies from overwork’ after logging 159 hours of overtime in a month,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/05/japanese-woman-dies-overwork-159-hours-overtime>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

cases, but these and numerous other cases of individuals pushed to the brink demonstrate a pattern of a demanding society that does not leave much room for individuals to buck norms. Given such an educational and employment future, it is not at all surprising that a cultural trend, fashion style, and art form that exudes tenderness and vulnerability became so popular.

Japan's current academic and work culture acts like a machine in this way, constantly producing the feelings that mascots, self- and service-oriented alike, seek to assuage if only for a moment. With an army, a flood of mascots filling every corner of Japanese stationery, clothing, and dry good stores, *kawaii*'s power is magnified each day this culture persists. Though *kawaii* has gone unexamined as a form of soft power given its relative newness, its realization in foreign embassy mascots is the truest form of the concept that exists today. Popularized by Joseph Nye in a variety of works on the subject, soft power is "getting others to want the outcomes you want," to follow your desires or lead because they admire something about you.⁹⁰ Until now, this notion of soft power has received much backlash by scholars, given the tendency of a few to overstate the power of brands abroad. Criticism centers around the presumption that the success of one country's commercial and artistic goods abroad automatically reflects an increase in a country's soft power and thus political leverage.⁹¹ However, unlike a director or writer whose movie gains popularity overseas, for example, foreign nations can control exactly what mascots say, do, and look like. Thus, foreign states can truly *use* this form of soft power, as opposed to the power residing in the hands of the film's creator, who exists

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Joseph Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 5.

⁹¹ Jing Sun, *Japan and China as Charm Rivals: Soft Power in Regional Diplomacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 9-10.

independently from the state. Thus, embassy mascots are exempt from the typical critiques of soft power, as they are *actors*, pop culture beings that ‘live’ in Japan while being controlled by their respective states.

What is unclear, however, is who exactly controls mascots’ soft power. On the one hand, based on this description of soft power, it could be argued that *Japan* is the one holding the reins, not foreign states as previously argued. Through sheer cultural clout, Japan has convinced these foreign countries to go its (cultural) way, rather than accepting each country’s cultural norms in their diplomatic relations. In this case, what does using a Japanese-styled mascot achieve, then, for foreign embassy? By willingly ‘succumbing’ to Japanese soft power and creating/employing a Japanese-style service-oriented mascot, foreign countries have, like brands that hire *self*-oriented mascots for campaigns, borrowed some of the power of the form for themselves. By recreating themselves in *kawaii* culture’s sweet image, foreign embassies can access a broader audience by using a Japanese mouthpiece, assuaging the anxieties that emerge when Japanese nationals engage with foreign (formal) entities. In this case, foreign countries are playing Japan’s game, though it benefits them overall. On the other hand, it could be argued that Japan has no real power over any one nation just because that nation is using an artistic form that happens to have originated in Japan. Especially with service-oriented mascots, as previously mentioned, the creation process is definitively cheap, popular, and simple. The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo simply found a way to localize how they spread their messages around study abroad. Though this issue is not a knot easily unknotted, the answer lies somewhere between these two extremes. As foreign nations have to learn the parameters of this inherently Japanese form and thus value what this Japanese format values, they do

willingly place themselves in a position of ‘following’ this Japanese system. However, as the mascot form is a lighter and not at all necessary aspect of international relations, i.e. the U.S. could still have a positive relationship Japan whether or not Tom existed, the degree of power that Japan holds over foreign nations is limited at best.

Furthermore, the longevity of mascots remains undecided. News outlets have been questioning their persistence as a trend since their rise to widespread popularity. *CityLab*, a subsidiary of *The Atlantic*, has only two articles about Japanese mascots: one in 2015 titled ‘The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Municipal Mascot,’ written shortly after the cull years, and one in 2018 by the creator of Mondo Mascots titled ‘Japanese Mascots Are Here to Stay.’ Cultural trends are finicky, to be sure, but given that mascots have now been around for over ten years, it does not seem they are going away any time soon. The Israeli and U.S. embassies have been consistently using their mascots since their introductions in 2013 and 2014 respectively, giving Shaloum-chan seven years as acting *yuru kyara* mascot and Tom five as Social Media and Goodwill Ambassador. With the recent introduction of Bahar-chan in 2018, the family of embassy mascots has only grown larger and been given some new life. On these facts alone, mascots are more than a passing fad.

This is not to say that self- or service-oriented mascots will remain exactly as they are today. Self-oriented mascots are defined by their flexibility, and thus may be able to achieve a wider and more lasting popularity as compared to service-oriented mascots. Hello Kitty’s now forty-plus years of popularity can be attributed to her ultimate simplicity and abstractable nature. Though a Vox Media video on self-oriented mascots claims that new Sanrio mascots, who have more clear (though still simple) personality,

are more modern and more popular among consumers, only time will tell if these simple personalities age well; Hello Kitty's blank slate of *kawaii* is inherently more flexible and adaptable than Gudetama's perpetual laziness.⁹² As for service-oriented mascots, each individual mascot's application is narrow, but companies and embassies can easily create new mascots for each new venture or message they wish to promote. On the other hand, they could go the route of Kumamon and refurbish existing mascots to reinvigorate interest.

Mascots as are, thus, an inherently flexible cultural phenomenon that is ever-expanding, always creating new iterations of *kawaii*, clumsiness, and kindly education. As such, it is difficult to say that the mascot family tree will stop budding new branches and fade into obscurity any time soon. However, though prefectures and businesses have increased income to prove their mascot's effectiveness, no such data currently exists for embassy mascots. Japanese study abroad statistics have levelled off in recent years, but they have not begun to increase. Further, this study has been unable to identify any studies showing that Japanese public perception of Israel has improved since Shalom-chan's introduction. Regardless of mascot's effectiveness or lack thereof, academia should pay careful attention to mascots and each new iteration that emerges, employ clear definitions regarding both old and new families, and examine them more fully in the broad scope of economic, historical, and cultural events. If something as silly as a Jellybean can become an ambassador to Japan, then the mascot trend and its possible effects on international relations are clearly worth keeping an eye on.

⁹² "How a melancholy egg yolk conquered Japan," YouTube video, 4:30, posted by "Vox," May 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTAnJTB9roI>

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